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ABSTRACT

The Entering Student Questionnaire is an instrument used by the Association of Theological Schools, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to gather information about student characteristics. This study examined information provided by the questionnaire over its 5 years of use. In the fifth year, Association member schools returned 5,575 responses from their entering students. The most striking fact to emerge from the use of the questionnaire is that its findings are very consistent. By and large, the portrait of entering students for fall 2000-2001 is the same as that from 5 years earlier. Seminary students represented in the survey were overwhelmingly white, with blacks and Asians representing less than 10% of the student population. About one in five students entered the seminary with an undergraduate major in religion or theology. Male students were more likely to anticipate full time parish ministry after ordination. Survey results also provided information about the admissions process and students' choice of seminary. (SLD)

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The *Entering Student Questionnaire*
A Study of Five Years of Use

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The *Entering Student Questionnaire*
A Study of Five Years of Use

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This report focuses on findings from the five-year use of the *Entering Student Questionnaire* by member schools of ATS. The first two sections provide background to the Student Information Project with comments about the nature of the sample and its interpretation. The four major sections which follow explore (1) the backgrounds of the students, (2) their religious history, church involvement, and call, (3) their choice of seminary, and (4) financial assistance, students' plans for work, and educational debt. A final section summarizes the findings.

I
Background

The *Entering Student Questionnaire* (ESQ) is one of two instruments in the Association's Student Information Project. The second is the *Graduating Student Questionnaire*. At the end of the 2000-2001 academic year, both instruments will have been used by a number of member schools over the five-year period.

The current form of the questionnaire was designed for use in the 1996-97 academic year. An earlier version by the same name was part of Lilly Endowment's *Quality of Ministerial Candidates* Program conducted by Joseph O'Neill who was with the Educational Testing Service. That form, used first in 1991, was developed in consultation with seminary administrators and initially involved university-based theological schools.

II
Characteristics of the Participating Schools

Schools participating in the *Entering Student Questionnaire* (ESQ) over the past five years reflect the broad spectrum of ATS member institutions. They include schools in the United States and Canada, virtually all of the denominational affiliations in the Association's membership, and nearly every State and Province. In the fifth year of the questionnaire's use, 106 schools returned 5,575 responses from their entering students. This represents responses from more than two-fifths of ATS member schools (44.7%).

Where comparisons with data from the *Fact Book on Theological Education, 1999-2000* are possible, they reveal that schools using the survey indicated a higher percentage of enrollment in the M.Div. program than was true for all members schools of the Association (61.1% vs. 49.6%). The latter percentage, however, represents the combined total enrollment in the M.Div. program

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on campus, through distance education, and at extension sites. No schools currently use the ESQ for either of the latter two categories of students. The percentage of students by race or ethnic groups was reasonably similar although the entering students in the questionnaire represented a slightly higher proportion of students with Asian backgrounds and fewer who chose Black. Entering students also reflected a higher percentage of female students (39.5% vs 34.2%) than was true for the enrollment of all students at ATS member schools.

These three comparisons suggest that, overall, the schools that use the *Entering Student Questionnaire* represent a fair sample of the total population of schools within the Association. While care must be taken with interpretations from any sample of a population, the five-year use of the survey underscores the stability of the sample and the reasonableness of making careful observations.

III
Backgrounds of the Respondents

1. Approximately three-fifths of the respondents to the *Entering Student Questionnaire* were enrolled in the M.Div. program. The percentage has ranged from 58.1% to 62.6% during the five years of the survey. On average, one-tenth of the respondents in any given year have been in either the M.A. professional or academic programs. In the current year, more than four-fifths (84.0%) of the total respondents have been enrolled in one of these three master's level programs.

2. While there has been a slight shift in the percentage of entering students by racial/ethnic background, students from the seminaries using the ESQ were overwhelmingly White. On average over the five-year period of the survey, three-quarters of the entering students (77.3% in 2000-2001) were White. Only those who identified themselves as Black or Asian represented any substantial minority. In the academic year 2000-2001, each of these groups was 9.1% of the entering student population. Asian students have ranged as high as 9.9% of the population and Black students as high as 11.8%.

3. In 1996 less than thirty percent (28.9%) of the entering M.Div. students were 25 years old or younger. In the current year, that percentage has increased to more than one-third (33.4%). White students were generally younger than either Black or Asian students. Of these three racial/ethnic groups, those who identified themselves as Black tended to be older on average than either of the other two. They also represented the highest percentage of students who were 50 years old or older, 15.9% in the current year These have been consistent findings over the five years of the questionnaire.

4. Half of the entering students in the M.Div. program this year were married and half were single. A slightly higher percentage of students were single this year than was true in the past (e.g., in 1998-99, the percentage was 52.5% married and 47.4% single). Slightly more than three-fifths (60.5%) were male while nearly two-fifths (39.5%) were female. The percentage of

male students has declined in the five years of the survey from 66.0%, while the percentage of female students has increased from 34.0%.

5. From 1996-97 to the present, approximately three-fifths of the entering students (63.1% in 2000-2001) had no dependents. An additional one-quarter (23.8%) had one or two dependents while approximately one in seven or eight (13.1%) over the same period had three or more dependents.

6. Approximately one-quarter of the students' parents or guardians completed high school. The percentage was 22.4% in 2000-2001. Approximately one-fifth (18.2%) had completed a bachelor's or four-year degree program while nearly a quarter (23.7%) had graduate studies or an advanced degree. More than two-fifths (41.9%) of the entering students' parents or guardians, then, held bachelor's degrees or higher. The pattern of these percentages has been consistent over the years with less than a 1% rise in the percentage of parents and guardians with a bachelor's degree or higher.

7. In the 2000-2001 sample, more than two-fifths (43.4%) of the entering students graduated from public colleges and universities while a similar percentage (42.7%) were graduates of private religious institutions. The remaining 13.9% graduated from private non-religious schools. This has been a consistent pattern over the years of the survey.

8. Students were able to identify the area of their undergraduate degree from a list of twenty possibilities. Approximately one in five (19.4%) majored in Religion or Theology. The next three areas, in rank order, were Social Sciences (9.9%), Business (8.4%), and Education (7.3%). These percentages and rankings for the current year were nearly identical with previous years. Majors in English have routinely placed fourth or fifth in the overall list. As high as these percentages have been, those who selected "Other" represent 7.5% of the students responding. In effect, this substantiates the breadth of the undergraduate preparation of students who are beginning theological studies.

9. Over the years, nearly four-fifths of entering students in the M.Div. program had no degree beyond the bachelor's level. This figure was 79.7% in the current year of the survey. One-fifth, on the other hand, had advanced degrees.

IV
The Seminarian's Religious History, Church Involvement, and Call

Two things are clear. Seminarians come from a wide variety of denominational and non-denominational backgrounds. For a number of these students, there has been a shift away from the religious tradition of upbringing to their current denomination. Students were able to choose from a list of forty-five religious traditions. Slightly more than half (55.6%) of the denominations registered gains as the current denomination of the students while slightly more than two-fifths (44.4%) indicated a loss in students' membership.

Seven out of ten students enrolled in the M.Div. program across the spectrum of denominations plan to be ordained. The percentage in the current year was 71.7%. One in seven (14.7%), however, was undecided. This has been a consistent pattern.

Approximately three in ten students (28.7% in 2000-2001) expect to be in full-time parish ministry after ordination. This percentage has slipped from a high of 33.1% in 1996-97. Male students are much more likely to anticipate full-time parish ministry, 34.2% of them made this choice in the current year, while only 21.6% of female students selected this option. Female students were half again as likely to choose "Undecided" as their male counterparts, 26.4% vs. 16.8% in the current year. The next three of the top five expectations for full-time ministry after ordination have regularly included college or university teaching (5.8% in the current survey), foreign missions (4.7%), and tied for fifth place, youth ministry or further graduate study (both with 4.6%). The list of top five choices as well as their relative ranks have been nearly identical over the five-year period of the survey.

Entering students were more likely to come from urban and suburban churches than either small town or rural congregations. Seven in ten (69.1%) cited their urban/suburban background in the current survey. Slightly more of the seminarians came from congregations with 100-250 members (24.5% in the current survey) as from either those congregations with 250-500 (23.1%) or 1000 or more members (23.4%). About equal percentages, one in seven or eight (13.6% and 15.4%), came from congregations with either fewer than 100 members or with 500-1000 members.

Nearly all of the entering seminarians in the M.Div. program (96.3% in 2000-2001) rated themselves as either "Very Active" or "Moderately" active in their worshiping community. About three-quarters of the group (73.1%) rated themselves "Very Active." Over the years of the survey approximately three-fifths of the seminarians (60.2% in the current survey) have held elected or appointed leadership positions in either the local church or other church body or related organization.

When did seminarians first consider theological school? What were the important influences in their call or personal choice for graduate theological studies? How do they describe their theological position and what kind of school did they choose?

Almost three in five M.Div. students first considered theological school either before or during college. The percentage was 57.9% in the current year. More than one-quarter (27.6%) considered it after some work experience.

Students were offered seventeen choices as potentially important factors in their call or choice of a profession (Table 1). Virtually tied for first and second in each of the years of the survey has been (1) the student experienced a call from God and (2) they had a desire to serve others. Vying for third place have been the opportunity for study or growth, interest in religious and theological questions, and the desire to make a difference. While there have been no gender differences in the first choice of the students, female students were consistently likely to choose

the opportunity for study or growth as their second choice while male students were likely to select the desire to serve others.

Table 1
Importance of Factors in Call or Choice of Profession

Source of Influence	Male N = 2890		Female N = 2291	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Family/spouse	3.2	1.4	2.9	1.4
Friend(s)	2.6	1.2	2.7	1.2
Encouragement of clergy	3.3	1.3	3.3	1.4
Pastoral Counseling/Spiritual Direction	3.0	1.4	3.2	1.5
Experienced call from God	4.5	1.0	4.5	1.0
Interest in religious/theological questions	3.8	1.2	4.0	1.1
Promise of spiritual fulfillment	3.4	1.2	3.7	1.2
Opportunity for study/growth	3.9	1.1	4.3	0.9
Search for meaning in life	2.9	1.4	3.2	1.4
Major life event	1.8	1.2	2.0	1.3
Desire to serve others	4.0	1.0	4.3	0.9
To celebrate sacraments	2.6	1.4	2.7	1.4
Contribute to social justice	2.9	1.4	3.3	1.3
Desire to preserve tradition	2.6	1.3	2.5	1.2
Desire to make a difference	3.9	1.2	3.9	1.2
Experience in campus organization	2.3	1.3	2.2	1.4
Experience in church life	3.4	1.3	3.5	1.3

(1 - Of no importance 3 - Somewhat important 5 - Very important)

On a five-point scale from "Very Conservative" to "Very Liberal," entering M.Div. students in the current year were more likely to rate themselves in rank order as "Conservative" (36.3%), "Middle-of-the-road" (32.3%), or "Liberal" (19.7%). In the five years of the survey, there has been a gradual shift in students' self-perception. More students currently view themselves as "Middle-of-the-road" than was true in 1996-97, 32.3% vs. 28.1%. Likewise, fewer rated themselves as "Very Conservative" or "Conservative"(42.4% vs. 48.5%) while slightly more identified themselves as "Liberal" or "Very Liberal" (25.3% vs. 23.5%).

There is a kind of "goodness of fit" between a seminarian's self-perception and his or her choice of a theological school. Conservatives tend to go to schools they perceive as either conservative or very conservative, students who identified themselves as "middle-of-the-road "go to similarly perceived schools, and liberals tend to go to liberal or very liberal schools.

V
The Choice of a Seminary

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Questions on the *Entering Student Questionnaire* explore how students learned about their schools, their first contact, if they visited the campus and, if so, how important that visit was, the factors affecting their decision to attend a particular institution, and their principal reasons for choosing a school.

Different pictures emerge if one looks at how entering students in all degree programs learned about their schools than if one looks at M.Div. students alone. In the first instance, the top three sources in rank order indicated the importance of (1) friends, (2) graduates, and (3) pastors. These three sources account for more than half of the responses (51.4% in the current year). The ranking has been consistent.

On the other hand, if one examines the responses of M.Div. students, a sightly different but important picture emerges. The top three sources were the same but first on the list is the pastor. While graduates and friends have occasionally traded second and third places over the years of the survey, these students' choice of the pastor has always been first.

Six choices were presented to students representing the range of possibilities for their first contact with schools. The revised questionnaire will add "E-mail/Internet." The consistent finding from the current form of the instrument indicates in rank order, (1) telephoned school (36.3%), (2) wrote to school requesting information (28.7%), and (3) visited school (21.0%). More than four-fifths of students (86.0%) have indicated these three choices, similarly ranked, over the years.

Approximately three-quarters of students (72.8% in the current year) have visited their prospective campuses. Of that group, more than four-fifths (83.2%) rated the visit as either "Important" or "Very Important" in their choice of a school.

What was the relative importance of a range of factors in the seminarian's decision to attend a particular school? The rank order for both male and female students has been unchanged in the five years of the survey. The current year's table reflects the rank order for both genders (Table 2). The school's academic reputation was first, followed by "Impressed with quality of faculty" and "Comfortable with doctrinal position."

When entering students were asked to select their top five reasons for choosing a particular institution from a list of twenty possibilities, the academic reputation of the school was always in first place, while the schools' theological perspective was always a close second (Table 3). Male

Table 2

Importance of Factors in Decision to Attend Institution

Source of Influence	Male N = 2868		Female N = 2275	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
My denomination encouraged attendance	2.5	1.5	2.3	1.5
Impressed with quality of faculty	3.7	1.2	3.8	1.2
Pastor encouraged me	2.5	1.5	2.4	1.5

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School's academic reputation	3.9	1.2	4.0	1.1
Graduate recommended it highly	3.1	1.6	3.1	1.6
Faculty member encouraged me	2.0	1.4	1.8	1.4
Wanted school close to home/work	2.4	1.6	2.8	1.7
Comfortable with doctrinal position	3.5	1.3	3.5	1.3
I was sent there by a religious supervisor	1.6	1.2	1.5	1.1
Impressed with admissions staff	2.7	1.4	3.0	1.4
Relative went there	2.3	1.5	2.3	1.6
Only theological school in area	1.6	1.1	1.8	1.3
Offered good financial aid package	2.2	1.5	2.3	1.6

(1= Of no importance 3=Somewhat important 5=Very important)

Table 3
Top Five Reasons for Choosing a Particular Institution

Top Reasons for Choice	Male		Female		* Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Close to home	920	6.6	869	7.9	1789	7.1
Denominational affiliation	1396	10.0	969	8.8	2365	9.5
Theological perspective	1776	12.7	1111	10.1	2887	11.5
Academic reputation	1726	12.3	1234	11.2	2960	11.8
Curriculum	936	6.7	753	6.8	1689	6.7
Sense of community	688	4.9	772	7.0	1460	5.8
Financial aid package	678	4.8	554	5.0	1232	4.9
Faculty	1220	8.7	777	7.0	1997	8.0
Ecumenical setting	300	2.1	320	2.9	620	2.5
Spirituality	984	7.0	819	7.4	1803	7.2
Location	873	6.2	661	6.0	1534	6.1
University setting	354	2.5	208	1.9	562	2.2
Family/spouse	331	2.4	248	2.2	579	2.3
Interdisciplinary/joint degree program	146	1.0	195	1.8	341	1.4
Flexible class schedule	486	3.5	461	4.2	947	3.8
Special academic program	340	2.4	342	3.1	682	2.7
Access to other theological schools	221	1.6	222	2.0	443	1.8
Multi-ethnic student body	273	2.0	286	2.6	559	2.2
Friend on campus	186	1.3	115	1.0	301	1.2
Availability of housing	161	1.2	112	1.0	273	1.1
Total	13995	100.0	11028	100.0	25023	100.0

* Total number of responses

students have tended to choose "Theological perspective" as their first choice while female students have chosen "Academic reputation." In third or fourth place with occasional shifts in rank were "Denominational affiliation" and "Faculty." Rounding out the list and consistently in fifth place was "Spirituality." The revised questionnaire will replace this choice with "Spiritual atmosphere."

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Financial Assistance, Plans for Work, and Educational Debt

On a six-point scale from "No significance" to "Did not apply for aid," entering students over the years of the survey tended to respond the same. Nearly half of the students (47.7% in the current year) indicated that financial aid ranged between "Significant" to "Greatest significance" in their final choice of a school. While approximately one in seven (14.2%) responded that such help was of "Some significance," almost two-fifths (38.0%) indicated that it was of no significance or, in fact, they did not even apply for aid. Single students tended to respond that financial aid was more important than did those who were married, while single female students and married male students attached more significance to the financial aid package in their choice of a school than either single male students or married female students.

The current surveys, the *Entering Student Questionnaire* and the *Graduating Student Questionnaire*, seek information only on educational debt. The revised forms will add a question that explores non-educational debt such as credit card and car loan debt.

The good news is that slightly more than three-fifths of all students (61.4% in the current survey) had no educational debt (Table 4). This finding has been consistent over the years of the survey. Female students in all degree programs were more likely than male students to have no educational debt.

Table 4
Educational Debt by Degree Program and Gender

Educational Debt	MDiv				Professional MA				Total	
	Male		Female		Male		Female			
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
None	1076	56.1	775	61.6	128	61.8	222	67.9	3191	61.4
Less than $5,000	150	7.8	80	6.4	13	6.3	17	5.2	351	6.7
$5,000 to $10,000	204	10.6	106	8.4	18	8.7	16	4.9	449	8.6
$10,000 to $15,000	176	9.2	93	7.4	15	7.2	29	8.9	414	8.0
$15,000 to $25,000	208	10.8	137	10.9	16	7.7	25	7.6	492	9.5
More than $25,000	105	5.5	68	5.4	17	8.2	18	5.5	304	5.8
Total	1919	36.9	1259	24.2	207	4.0	327	13.4	5201	100.0

However, when the categories of educational debt from $10,000 to more than $25,000 are examined, a different picture emerges. One-fourth of all current entering M.Div. students (24.8%) have an educational debt in excess of $10,000. Male and female students were nearly identical in their debt loads. Furthermore, the percentage of students with this debt load has been steadily increasing over the five-year history of the survey. In 1996-97 this group represented only 17.6% of the total. Each year has seen the percentage increase until at the present time it represents one-fourth of all entering M.Div. students.

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What then about the planned patterns for work during their first year of seminary? In the current year of the survey, more than four-fifths of the M.Div. respondents (82.7%) were full-time students. This has been the general ratio of full-time to part-time students in the five-year history of the survey. As many full-time students had no plans to work (21.6%) as those who plan to work more the 20 hours per week (21.7%) (Table 5). Nearly identical percentages planned to work either 10-15 hours per week or 15-20 hours. The situation for part-time students was radically different. Nearly four-fifths (78.6%) planned to work more than 20 hours per week.

Table 5
Enrollment Status by Length of Commute and Planned Hours of Work per Week

M.Div.	Planned Hours of Work per Week											
Length of Commute	None		1-10		10-15		15-20		More than 20		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
No Commute	279	23.9	208	17.8	328	28.1	215	18.4	139	11.9	169	43.1
Less than ½ hour	168	21.2	116	14.6	170	21.4	177	22.3	162	20.4	793	29.2
½ to 1 hour	76	16.8	37	8.2	71	15.7	102	22.6	166	36.7	452	16.7
More than 1 hour	64	21.4	25	8.4	301	10.0	59	19.7	121	40.5	299	11.0
Total	587	21.6	386	14.2	599	22.1	553	20.4	588	21.7	2713	100.0

It is interesting to examine the relationship between planned hours of work per week and the length of the commute for full- and part-time students. There is certainly a relationship between hours available to attend classes and complete assignments and the impact of both hours of work and the time to and from campus.

The patterns have been the same over the years. More than two-fifths of the full-time M.Div. students (43.1% in the current year) have no commute. A similar percentage (45.9%) have some commute but no more than an hour. Only a tenth (11.0%) of the full-time students have a commute longer than an hour. While only one in five full-time students (21.7%) plans to work more than 20 hours per week, nearly one-half of these students (48.8%) have a commute to and from school that ranges from one half-hour to more than one hour. The situation is more serious for part-time students. Nearly four out of five (78.6%) plan to work more than 20 hours per week and nearly seven out of ten (69.0%) of these students have a commute that ranges from one half-hour to more than one hour.

VII
Conclusions

The single, most striking feature in the five-year history of the *Entering Student Questionnaire*

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has been the consistency of its findings. New schools have entered the program over the years while a few others have interrupted their use of the instrument. By and large, the portrait of entering students in the fall of the 2000-2001 school year is the same as that five years earlier in 1996-97.

The following are important consistent findings and key changes over the five years of the survey.

Consistent Findings

1. Seminary students represented in the survey were overwhelmingly White. Blacks and Asians, the next highest in percentage, represented less than one-tenth of the student population.

2. Students who identified themselves as Black tended to be older on average than either White or Asian students. They also had the highest percentage of students who were 50 years old or older.

3. About one in five students entered seminary with an undergraduate major in Religion or Theology. Undergraduates with majors in Social Sciences and Business were next, each with less than one-tenth of the total.

4. Males students were much more likely than female students to anticipate full-time parish ministry after ordination. Female students were more likely to select "Undecided" about their goals as they began their seminary program.

5. Three in five M.Div. students first considered entering seminary either before or during college.

6. Students regularly stated that their choice for coming to seminary was first, a call from God, and second, the desire to serve others.

7. The top sources for M.Div students learning about their schools were their pastor, graduates, and friends.

8. The first contact of entering M.Div. students with their schools was that they (1) telephoned, (2) wrote, or (3) visited the school.

9. More than four out of five seminarians who visited their prospective seminary rated that visit either "Important" or "Very Important."

10. The two top reasons for choosing a particular seminary in rank order were the school's academic reputation and its theological perspective.

11. Three in five M.Div students, on average, have held elected or appointed leadership

positions in the church in the past five years.

Key Changes

1. Schools using the *Entering Student Questionnaire* reported that a greater percentage of their entering M.Div. students were 25 years or younger than was true in the earlier years of the survey. The percentage has risen from 28.9% to 33.4%.

2. The percentage of female students in the M.Div. program has increased from one in three (34.0%) in the first year of the survey (1996-97) to nearly two in five (39.5%) in the current year.

3. More students currently describe their personal theological position as "Middle-of-the-road" than was true in the earlier years of the survey. Fewer identify themselves as either "Very Conservative" or "Conservative" while slightly higher percentages identify themselves as "Liberal" or "Very Liberal."

4. The percentage of entering M.Div. students with $10,000 or more in educational debt has risen in the five years of the survey from less than one-fifth (18.8%) to nearly one-quarter (24.8%).

March 20, 2001

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